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Embassy in Moscow 'riddled with KGB'

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The U.S. Embassy in Moscow "is riddled with KGB operatives" who are operating under the cover of support and maintenance workers, according to White House and congressional sources.

These sources told The Washington Times that there are between 100 and 130 Soviets working at the U.S. Embassy at any given time. They handle routine maintenance, electrical and plumbing repairs, do the building cleaning and, until recently, answered the telephones.

Soviet personnel also are used as auto mechanics and drivers for U.S.

diplomats. They run the food-service operations and man the kiosk in the embassy where liquor is sold.

U.S. counterintelligence officials say that these Soviets, who are assigned their tasks by the Kremlin, also take orders from and report to the KGB on goings-on at the embassy.

CBS News reported Monday that about a dozen typewriters in the embassy had been bugged from 1982 to 1984. This allowed the KGB to ascertain the content of documents typed on the machines.

Tiny sensing devices hidden in the typewriters "picked up the contents of documents typed by embassy secretaries and transmitted them to antennas hidden in the embassy walls," CBS said. "The antennas, in turn, relayed the signals to a listening post outside the embassy."

CBS quoted one intelligence officer as saying the potential for compromising sensitive information should be viewed with "considerable seriousness."

U.S. officials have been warning for several years of the security risks associated with employing Soviet nationals in the embassy.

But, they report, the State Department has not felt sufficiently concerned to warrant changing the situation.

"It's an outrage," one senior administration official said.

"When a Russian dissident, or people wanting to give us information, called the U.S. Embassy in Mos-

cow, his call would be answered by a KGB switchboard operator."

The situation has prompted several high-level investigations, the sources said. A counterintelligence specialist was dispatched to Moscow earlier this year to study the embassy staffing situation firsthand. His report was said to include the following:

- Soviet nationals operate the embassy carpool and also are the auto mechanics. In this capacity they have access to the diplomatic fleet. Officials suspect that bugs may have been planted in the various vehicles. Even if they haven't, having a Soviet driver should make confidential conversation impossible.

- The kiosk in the embassy, which sells liquor as well as sundries, is staffed by Soviet nationals. These people can observe who in the embassy may have a drinking problem — important information to KGB recruitment or blackmail efforts.

- The person operating the embassy canteen is said to be a Chilean by birth married to a Soviet citizen. "Pablo," as he is called, is friendly with many American diplomats. But, as one source said, "What is he doing at the embassy in Moscow if he is not a Chilean communist?"

"Pablo, along with Soviets working in the kitchen, can observe who is having lunch with whom, who is flirting with whom, and so on," the source said. Again, this is said to be useful information to the KGB.

- The embassy telephone operators are Soviets. This gives them firsthand knowledge of who is calling in and the potential to monitor conversations. One source said this situation, at least, may have changed since the counterintelligence officer's report.

Having Soviet nationals roaming the U.S. Embassy has long worried some Reagan administration offi-

cials. The President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB) launched its own investigation of the embassy staffing situation in 1983.

According to a source familiar with the PFIAB probe, State Department and other officials were asked to explain the rationale for employing Soviets rather than American citizens.

Secretary of State George Shultz reportedly told PFIAB that he was not personally aware of the embassy situation. The panel also asked Richard Combs, who was deputy director of the State Department's Soviet Desk, for an explanation.

Mr. Combs reportedly replied that it was standard practice to employ Soviet nationals for menial and support work at the embassy. The reason, he reportedly said, hinged on both budgetary and policy reasons.

If Americans were hired to do the work it would cost the taxpayer far more, Mr. Combs reportedly said. Furthermore, these lower-level workers would be subject to recruitment by the KGB and would represent a security risk. According to this source, it was felt safer to have "known" KGB operatives around the embassy than unknown operatives.

"Their thinking was that at least you knew who the KGB was with the Soviets there," the source said. "But if the KGB recruited an American, you wouldn't necessarily know about it."

This logic apparently irritated several PFIAB members, who challenged Mr. Combs. "By this reasoning, you would say it would be best if all our embassy positions were staffed by the KGB," one member charged.

Mr. Combs, who is now director of the State Department's Office of East European Affairs, declined yesterday to comment on the situation.

"I did speak to PFIAB two or three years ago," Mr. Combs said, "but what you are asking about is all very classified information. We just can't comment on it. It's highly sensitive."

PFIAB is a presidentially-appointed civilian panel whose purpose is to advise the president on intelligence matters.

— Ted Agres